

Nadine Gordimer: A patriot with a heart



I first met Nadine in 1959 or 1960, probably. On one occasion, I had just been reading *The Classic* magazine, founded by Nat Nakasa, and her name was in one of those *Classics*.

I can't remember how I got to find out where she stayed but I went to her place. I had with me a batch of poems I had written. We discussed them in great detail: punctuation marks, construction, metaphors. We must have sat there for three hours, with her going through my poems in intricate detail.

And, after that, she still said I must feel absolutely free at any time should I want to come back with more work, and I did.

I think my development as a writer really started there. At that time, I was really focused on poetry but I grew and went on to write novels.

From that point on, every novel that she released, she signed and made sure I got a copy, and every time I released a novel, I signed one for her.

Global discussions

Our friendship led to many political, cultural and global discussions. Nadine was older than me by about 20 years so she is one friend I learnt a lot from.

But she always treated me with respect. Whenever she would get invitations to travel abroad, she always encouraged her hosts to invite me as well, so we travelled to the United States, Europe, South America and around the continent together. When I was in exile, we travelled to places such as Senegal, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

She said she felt that a very important work of mine was *Scatter the Ashes and Go*. First, she commended my style but also said it brought out issues that were not well-known or written

about – life in the ANC camps – but in a fictionalised form. She said that she felt the book was worthy of being published more widely.

When I was in exile (I left South Africa in 1974 and came back in 1990) – in the United Kingdom, the US or Botswana – whenever she was there, she made sure we met and she updated me on what was going on.

In Botswana, she did a lot of work for the movement, the ANC. She made sure that the arts and culture movement flourished.

We had lots of meetings with Bill Ainslie and Colin Smuts, trying to set up community arts centres and organisations for writers and theatre people. Things such as the South African Music Association, the Performing Arts Workers Equity and the Congress of South African Writers happened in part because of those discussions.

Cultural boycott

During that time, we also discussed the cultural boycott. It was something she had reservations about. But, in the end, she felt that, if that was what the ANC called for, it must happen.

Her reservations stemmed from her love for South Africa. She felt that South African artists must be exposed and that people, especially in the rural areas, would not be able to travel abroad as a result.

Politically, I'm not so sure whether I would call Nadine a radical but what I can reiterate is that she felt a deep love for South Africans and was keenly aware of the negative impact of apartheid, not only on white people but especially on black people.

She didn't spare herself from understanding intellectually what needed to be done but she also committed herself to practically implementing the demise of apartheid.

I would not describe her as radical because radical can also mean reckless. But with her, every action was well thought out.

Nadine was utterly committed, forward-looking and progressive.

Short-sighted ideology

She initially had problems with Black Consciousness (BC). I introduced her to Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko. Many times, when Steve came to Johannesburg, we stopped by at Nadine's place and even used her car to go around.

She felt BC was short-sighted in its ideology and what it set out to do, and that it could easily be misinterpreted if people on the ground did not understand what the leadership stood for. She felt there was danger in the politics of colour and that it amounted to walking on thin ice. Her logic was: rather think broadly about the system you want to put in place and what you want to do.

We had frank discussions about this. Eventually, she understood that it was not anti-white, as the media portrayed it. It was a philosophy about black people mobilising themselves and freeing themselves. She could not quarrel with that.

Nadine's ability to depict the lives of South Africans across race and class rests on her compassion and being a committed South African patriot. In this way, she interacted with many people across ethnic and cultural lines, which helped her understand the lives of South Africans. To observe this, everybody should read *My Son's Story* and *July's People*. There are others, too, among her works, but these two are a fine example of that.

Discussion of the future

I went to visit Nadine three weeks ago and we sat for hours discussing the future of our country, our continent and the world. I was hesitant to push the discussion because of her health, especially on points where we disagreed, but she insisted. That was Nadine.

In her last novel, *No Time like the Present*, she is extremely critical of our government. It's okay. She had a right to do that because she fought for this democracy. It's an important book.

When I travelled with her to receive the Nobel prize in Norway, I saw how people were in awe of her. People outside of this country knew more about Nadine than people here, and the impact of her work meant that they took strong positions against apartheid.

Her work should be included as set works by the departments of basic education and higher education to help raise the consciousness of our youth.

Mongane Wally Serote is a writer and poet. He spoke to Kwanele Sosibo.

Like so much she had done, it was an essential gesture

It's a Highveld summer afternoon, nearly midsummer, misty with moth-rain, skies free of thunderclouds. In the lounge, the light is grey, reflecting the drizzle without.

The writer's words, from an interview five or so years before, nudge at the books editor. "The tension between inside and outside – it is out of that that the work comes," she had said then. Her limpid eyes gaze out now into the garden, at the lawn summer-cut, flowers in bloom. Other

echoes sound at him. “A small room with a table or desk facing a blank wall. Nothing else but books in the room; maybe a flower if you pick one, to give you a smell. You are in the world you are creating,” she’d said in answer to his asking about the best sort of room for writing.

There’s such a room nearby, in which an electronic typewriter stands, authoritatively but serenely, on a plain wooden desk. When only 12, the writer had saved up all her present-money to buy a Swiss typewriter; probably a Hermes Baby, she’d once told the books editor. Bigger and better machines followed, but never a PC.

It’s almost impossible to find a copy of *The Essential Gesture*, he says of rueful questing through Jo’burg’s second-hand bookshops. I think I have a spare copy, the writer says, rising from the couch and taking up the elegantly thin walking-stick that now supports her inside and outside the house. Up flights of broad, polished pine steps she goes.

She is upstairs for quite some time. Then she is at the head of the stairs, then back in the lounge, a hardback copy of *The Essential Gesture* in hand. It is a first edition, complete with dust jacket. She gives it to the books editor, not to look at, but as a gift. It is, like so much of what she has done in her life and work, an essential gesture.

Darryl Accone is the books editor of the Mail & Guardian.

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